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Cathy Burgess

Oxford School of Hospitality Management, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, United Kingdom

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Managerial Competencies for U.K. Hotel Financial Controllers: Are They Hospitality Managers or Accountants?

Cathy Burgess

Oxford School of Hospitality Management, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This article aimed to identify the key managerial competencies required of hotel financial controllers and the importance of hospitality experience to their roles. Data from a longitudinal study of hotel financial controllers have been analyzed, gathered using a content analysis of job advertisements, a survey of U.K. hotel financial controllers and interviews with key financial managers. Using a grounded theory approach, the findings show that although there are many similarities with the generic accounting profession, the hotel finance role is unique. Their experience combining with hospitality management competencies to support operational managers. Their understanding of the complexity of the operation, in a dynamic and perishable environment, enables hotel financial controllers to act as business advisors to other managers, thereby enhancing profitability on behalf of stakeholders. Implications for industry include (a) the need for further promotion of hospitality finance as a valid career and (b) the importance of recruiting managers with experience of this distinctive industry context.

Introduction

The financial profile of the hotel industry has seen exceptional changes during recent years, with rapid expansion of properties in the United Kingdom and globally (Gold, 2015), with a suggested 16% increase in contribution to the U.K. economy in 5 years, and future growth of 8.5% to 2020 (Intel, 2015; People1st, 2014). These changes include a shift in ownership patterns, whereby the majority of international hotel groups no longer own their properties (Otus Analytics, 2012), being now more commonly owned by external investors, and run under management contract or franchise (Hodari & Sturman, 2014; Ivanova & Ivanov, 2015), often under a major brand.

In turn, this has resulted in a greater range of stakeholders who are interested in both the financial and nonfinancial aspects of the business (Ivanova & Ivanov, 2015), ranging from those based externally (owners, banks, asset managers, government, for example) to those internal stakeholders including brand management, suppliers,

managers, and staff (Burgess, 2012a). Their expectations of profitability, return on investment, and cash flow are a key issue for companies, filtering down to unit and individual manager level (Burgess, 2012a; Hodari & Sturman, 2014; Lo, 2013). Whereas individual department managers are generally responsible for their own areas, the hotel financial controller (HFC; Burgess, 2000) and general manager (GM) are responsible for the overall financial results of the business (Burgess, 2012a). HFCs are often formally qualified in accounting (Venegas, 2014a; hospa.org), but are also working in what Cheng and Wong (2015, p. 131) called a “distinctive” industry, with specific characteristics such as perishability, dynamic pricing and interrelated departments.

The increased complexity of hotel businesses, combined with the expectations of effective performance, means that the HFCs responsibilities have evolved to a multidisciplinary role that supports and advises other managers, interacting with both internal and external stakeholders (Burgess, 2012a; Gibson, 2004). They require a range of professional skills, therefore, both those that are

generic to all hospitality managers and those technical financial skills (Burgess, 2013a), which may be more closely aligned to those in the general accounting profession. Management competencies may also be known as *soft skills*, whereas the technical aspects are described as *hard skills*, according Sisson and Adams (2013).

Cardy and Selvarajan (2006) argued that management competencies are individual to the particular role and industry context, with Giousmpasoglou (2014) identifying hotel ownership specifically as affecting on manager's roles. Authors such as Asree and colleagues (2010), People1st (2014) and Weber and colleagues (2013) have shown a link between competencies and profitability, and Cheng and Wong (2015) said also that this will therefore improve the status and reputation of the industry. Therefore, they are what are needed for the job (Cardy and Selvarajan, 2006, p. 240), being based both on the individual person (their attributes) and those that are "value-based" and expected by the organization. This implies that the HFC, for example, may require specific competencies for their particular job, generating the question, "Are they hospitality managers or accountants—or something different?"

This article, therefore, aimed to identify the role and management competencies required of HFCs, within the specific industry context. However, there is very limited literature in this direct area, the majority of research being based on general and operational management and there was a gap in evidence of the competencies for particular roles, such as the HFC. Much of the data that has been gathered for the current project therefore is new and only limited comparisons can be made to previous, more general, studies. Hence, a grounded theory approach (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008) is taken, whereby an initial literature review from generic and hospitality sources is presented to identify gaps in research. Data from the primary research is compared to further literature in order to generate new findings and conclusions, and recommendations will be made as to the development of HFCs competencies, in turn, benefiting other managers in their roles and enhancing hotel profitability. This approach results in a largely chronological structure that uses both secondary and primary data within the various sections to

generate findings that are carried forward to the following theme. It is not within the remit of this article to explore the technical skills required, as identified within job descriptions, but to focus on the personal competencies essential for an HFC in industry.

Initially, the basic concepts behind a grounded theory approach are discussed, with the various methods used for collecting the primary data being briefly described. This is followed by an overview of the challenges that are impacting on management, as detailed in literature, and then the competencies required of hospitality managers and of those in the management accounting profession will be explored. The competencies specific to HFCs will be identified, and the challenges they perceive, with further evidence from both secondary and primary data from a longitudinal study of this group of managers, and then comparisons made with both hospitality and accounting. An exploration of the importance of industry experience will also be undertaken, so as to generate conclusions and recommendations for industry.

Methods

Altinay and Paraskevas (2008, p. 78) said that grounded theory is "theory grounded in observable experiences" and that researchers progress from the descriptive ("what is") to suggest the reason for these occurrences ("why"). They propose the use of a preliminary literature review to identify gaps and so aid in the focus of the project. The differing approaches to grounded theory proposed by various authors are discussed by Easterby-Smith and colleagues (2012), who concluded that various methods are feasible. Different authors have proposed the use of different methods, with Altinay and Paraskevas (2008) saying that these should be largely qualitative, but Saunders and colleagues (2007) suggesting a combination of both inductive and deductive approaches, and Easterby-Smith and colleagues (2012) a mixed-method approach.

One further debate is whether the researcher should be "involved in the interrogation" of data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p. 59) or whether they should maintain a distance. Altinay and Paraskevas (2008) expanded on this by stating that the researcher should be experienced and

therefore knowledgeable and therefore able to interpret the results to develop new findings. Easterby-Smith and colleagues (2012) also emphasized the need for the study to be fit for purpose, and that the data gathered should be understandable and usable, also supporting the need for an experienced researcher. For the present study, I have had extensive experience of the various methods of data collection, throughout my longitudinal study, and therefore was able to design the data collection and then interpret the data to generate new findings.

Three separate research methods have been used to collect the empirical data for this article, continuing my longitudinal study into the role of the U.K.-based HFC that commenced in 1990, utilizing the membership database of the Hospitality Professionals Association (HoSPA, see hospa.org). The ability to replicate research using a representative sample of a particular group for an extended period (Gomm, 2009, p. 194) enables the gathering of comparable data (Menard, 1991, p. 13) and an analysis of trends at a “macro” level (Ruspini, 2002, p. 70). This HoSPA study has encompassed a wide range of research methods to gather data on the role and responsibilities, education and job profiles of HFCs and opinions on the issues affecting their roles. These have primarily consisted of an anonymous survey of the membership, first performed in 1990 and repeated every 5 years since then, plus further qualitative research via interviews or focus groups to explore specific issues in depth.

For this most recent stage of the study, initially secondary data was collected through a content analysis of 53 job advertisements for hospitality financial managers in June 2015, replicating an earlier review (Burgess, 2013a) and allowing a detailed analysis of key attributes, qualifications and experience expected by employers. Second, data from the December 2015 five-yearly survey of the HoSPA’s membership has been analyzed, the overall rationale for this approach having been explored in previous papers (Burgess, 2007, for example). The comprehensive list of questions explores the types of hotels, role and responsibilities, accounting structures, systems, professional development and salary and benefit levels, thereby generating extensive data that can

be compared with prior findings and allowing the identification of trends in industry practices over many years. Questions have been updated for the most recent survey to reflect changes in industry practice, and are principally quantitative with some qualitative questions to ascertain opinions on trends in financial management over the past 5 years, and the effect on their roles and competencies. Questionnaires were distributed using SurveyMonkey through the HoSPA’s administrator, ensuring that the researcher had no access to respondents’ details. The overall response rate was somewhat disappointing, with 100 usable respondents out of a membership distribution of approximately 1,200 (8.2%, comparable to similar past surveys), although not all HoSPA members were eligible (being not hotels-based or retired, for example). Given the relatively low response rate, and the complexity of HFC’s profiles, it was not possible to perform a full statistical analysis, but the data allow the identification of trends and broad conclusions to be drawn.

The qualitative data from the final comments sections was then used to develop further research questions for exploration. Therefore, a series of interviews was conducted between April and June 2016 with industry representatives from both the finance and revenue management areas, to gain more qualitative data (Altinay & Paraskevas, 2008) about the challenges facing the industry and changes facing the HFCs. The questions included a review of the accounting and management structure and systems of the participant’s hotel, the effect of specific challenges faced by the hotel, and the role of the HFC both internally and externally. These allowed the exploration in depth of specific issues emerging from the survey findings, replicating previous research from 2006 to 2007 (again, for a rationale see Burgess, 2011, for example) with a range of topics being discussed of which only a few are described here. Ten interviews were conducted among senior financial personnel who had volunteered to participate, as shown in Table 1. A semi-structured approach was used which allowed the researcher to explore issues with the interviewee (Saunders et al., 2012), extensive notes being taken and then key issues identified from the discussion, for analysis.

Table 1. Financial Managers: Interview Participants.

Participant	Role	All U.K.-based hotel type
A	Financial controller	Regional country medium-sized hotel.
B	Regional finance manager	Major global international 5* brand
C	Financial director	Regional country-based group, individual historic hotels
D	Area financial controller	International 5* deluxe brand
E	Financial director	Small boutique hotel group
F	Area director of finance	Luxury international brand
G	Director of finance	Two historic regional hotels
H	Financial director	U.K. regional group
I	Regional director of finance	Major global international 5* brand
J	Financial director	Single-city boutique group

Preliminary literature review

This section gives an overview of the challenges facing the hotel industry, together with the competencies expected of both managers and accounting professionals, using both generic and hospitality literature.

Challenges facing the industry

Recent industry reports have confirmed that the U.K. hotel industry remains buoyant (Mintel, 2016), but with some concerns that although London is continuing to thrive, this is at the expense of the regions (Euromonitor, 2016b, p. 2). Both the luxury and budget markets are also healthy, but it is the mid-market that is struggling to retain occupancy and profitability (Euromonitor, 2016b). Other divergence emerges, with the international brands showing the most growth (Euromonitor, 2016a), while the independent and domestic brands (which are largely regionally based) are suffering. Hence although some hotels are performing well, there is a “dichotomous landscape” (Euromonitor, 2016b) where although some hotels are thriving, others are experiencing major issues in retaining occupancy and generating profits.

The industry has also traditionally been capital-intensive, requiring constant reinvestment to remain competitive in a fast-moving and perishable environment (Singal, 2015). Short product lifecycles (Li et al., 2009) mean that the industry must consistently innovate (D’Arcy & Omar, 2015) to find new ways of selling products and

services to customers (Campo et al., 2014), requiring investment in human, technological (Mintel, 2015), and physical resources. The growth in systems is predicted to continue (Euromonitor, 2016a), principally to meet the needs of customers who increasingly book online through third-parties (Mintel, 2016). Particular effects on profitability include the costs of these bookings and the effect of the introduction of the Living Wage in the United Kingdom in April 2016 (HotStats, 2016).

Hotels are also very complex in their operations, markets and ownership (Espino-Rodriguez & Gil-Padilla, 2015), with the major brands attempting to standardize products and services (Giousmpasoglou, 2014), although others argue that a centralized approach may not be appropriate in different environments (Indjejkian & Matejka, 2006), resulting in a need for more localized controls and decision making (Altinay & Altinay, 2004; Espino-Rodriguez & Gil-Padilla, 2015). This puts pressure on managers to be effective in identifying both issues and opportunities to optimize profitability.

The key competencies needed by hospitality managers

Many researchers have discussed the key competencies required of hospitality managers to perform their roles, in a complex and increasingly culturally diverse environment (Sourouklis & Tsagdis, 2013). Cheng and Wong (2015) identified the increased need for professional managers within the distinctive hospitality industry to serve the predicted growth, and said also that this will improve the status and reputation of the industry, supported by People1st (2014), whose report has emphasized the need to develop managerial skills. Specifically, the combination of education and experience is invaluable for developing skilled managers (O’Mahony, 2015; Wang, 2013), as understanding the industry context is critical (Cheng & Wong, 2015; Giousmpasoglou, 2014). Therefore, in addition to the generic competencies, authors such as Quinn (2013) or Walsh and colleagues (2015) have stressed the importance of a service orientation, and in particular the benefits of operational experience and understanding the specific hospitality industry context (Ahelalat, 2015; Giousmpasoglou, 2014; Li et al., 2013). This results in higher employability levels

and rapid career enhancement (Lynch, 2014; Zehrer & Mossenlechner, 2009). Tavitiyaman and colleagues (2014) emphasized that their importance can vary according to many factors such as location or type of hotel, and so there is no definitive list that is applicable to all scenarios.

Table 2 shows some of those competencies, similar to those found in the generic literature and rated as most important by some recent key authors, building on earlier work by Kay and Russette (2000), Chung-Herrera and colleagues (2003), Kay and Moncarz (2004), and Mayo and Thomas-Haybert (2005), among many. A brief description is given that has been adapted from the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2011) and from the quoted authors.

The terminology can vary according to different authors, making identification more complex: for example, *analysis* as a competence is cited by very few authors, but closer perusal of the descriptions indicates that it is a recognised skill. However, it is clear that hospitality managers need a broad range of competencies to perform their roles, whatever their particular job might be, but that these might have different levels of importance. Principally researchers have identified leadership, teamwork, and communication as key skills for hospitality managers, together with cultural awareness and problem-solving in an increasingly diverse industry. Tavitiyaman and colleagues (2014), in their research among general managers, ranked what they describe as leadership competencies in order of importance; the top

Table 2. Critical Competencies for Hospitality Managers.

Competency	Summary description	Examples of recent key authors identifying these competencies
Analysis	Examine methodically, explain and interpret	Koenigsfeld et al. (2012), Sisson and Adams (2013), Hodari and Sturman (2014)
Communication	A share or exchange of ideas, both verbal and non-verbal	Jeou-Shyan et al. (2011), Koenigsfeld et al. (2012), Simons (2012), Testa and Sipe (2012), Tavitiyaman et al. (2014), Alhelalat (2015), Jones and Jack (2016)
Cultural awareness	Understanding the impact of customs, ideas and behaviour of particular social groups	Nolan et al. (2010), Testa and Sipe (2012), Madera et al. (2013), Quinn (2013), Sourouklis and Tsagdis (2013)
Ethics and integrity	Having moral principles and conduct	Tesone and Ricci (2006), Nolan et al. (2010), Ricci (2010), Koenigsfeld et al. (2012), Simons (2012), Weber et al. (2013)
Financial skills/ awareness	Manage resources and understand figures	Burgess (2007), Blayney (2009), Zehrer and Mossenlechner (2009), Nolan et al. (2010), Testa and Sipe (2012), Jones and Jack (2016)
Flexibility	Able to change readily to meet new circumstances	Ricci (2010), Tavitiyaman et al. (2014)
Innovation/ entrepreneurship	To introduce new methods or ideas	Blayney (2009), Hancer et al. (2009), Ricci (2010), Testa and Sipe (2012), Burgess (2013b), Campo et al. (2014), Nicely and Tang (2015)
Leadership	Heading a group and taking decisions on their behalf	Blayney (2009), Asree et al. (2010), Jeou-Shyan et al. (2011), Koenigsfeld et al. (2012), Quinn (2013), Tavitiyaman et al. (2014), Cheng and Wong (2015)
Listening	Giving ones attention to another person's words	Tesone and Ricci (2006), Zehrer and Mossenlechner (2009), Koenigsfeld et al. (2012), Lolli (2013), Weber et al. (2013)
Motivation	Desire to do something, enthusiasm	Blayney (2009), Zehrer and Mossenlechner (2009), Weber et al. (2013)
Negotiation	Reaching an agreement with others by discussion	Zehrer and Mossenlechner (2009), Quinn (2013)
Organization	Systematic approach to tasks	Blayney (2009)
Planning	The ability to decide what to do in the future, to prepare	Blayney (2009), Testa and Sipe (2012), Tavitiyaman et al. (2014)
Problem-solving	Ability to deal with unwelcome issues or difficult things	Zehrer and Mossenlechner (2009), Nolan et al. (2010), Cheung et al. (2010), Ricci (2010), Jeou-Shyan et al. (2011), Li et al. (2013), Wang (2013), Weber et al. (2013), Alhelalat (2015)
Professionalism/ work ethic	Being competent and skilful and using appropriate behaviour in business	Nolan et al. (2010), Ricci (2010), Testa and Sipe (2012), Tavitiyaman et al. (2014), Cheng and Wong (2015)
Self-development	Growth or achievement	Zehrer and Mossenlechner (2009), Testa and Sipe (2012), Giousmpasoglou (2014)
Service orientation/ customer focused	Dealing with people who buy goods and services	Li et al. (2013), Quinn (2013), Wang (2013), Giousmpasoglou (2014), Lynch (2014), Alhelalat (2015), Cheng and Wong (2015), Walsh et al. (2015)
Strategic thinking	Long-term consideration of future action	Cheung et al. (2010), Testa and Sipe (2012), Tavitiyaman et al. (2014)
Teamwork	A group of people working together for combined effective action	Nolan et al. (2010), Testa and Sipe (2012), Weber et al. (2013), Quinn (2013), Tavitiyaman et al. (2014), Alhelalat (2015), Cheng and Wong (2015)
Time management	Effective management of one's work	Nolan et al. (2010), Testa and Sipe (2012)
Training	Teaching people a skill or behaviour through regular practice and instruction	Avril and Magnini (2007), Nolan et al. (2010), Koenigsfeld et al. (2012), Quinn (2013), Weber et al. (2013)

Table 3. Competencies Required of Management Accountants.

Competency	Examples of recent key authors identifying these competencies
Communication	Lawson et al. (2006), Bots et al. (2009), Jackling and de Lange (2009), Paulsson (2012)
Ethics	Lawson et al. (2006), Bots et al. (2009)
Flexibility	Bots et al. (2009)
Leadership	Bots et al. (2009), Jackling and de Lange (2009), France (2010), Kim et al. (2012)
Operational knowledge	Paulsson (2012)
Organisational skills	Kim et al. (2012)
Planning	Bots et al. (2009), Paulsson (2012), Kim et al. (2012)
Problem solving	Lawson et al. (2006)
Teamwork	Jackling and de Lange (2009), Kim et al. (2012), Paulsson (2012)
Training	France (2010)
Work experience	Jackling and de Lange (2009)

four being team-building (which they combine with ethics), planning, leadership, and communication. Similar results were found by Jeou-Shyan and colleagues (2011), who also found that leadership was the most important, with problem solving, communication, and financial skills all critical.

Testa and Sipe (2012) conducted interviews among a wide range of industry managers and grouped their identified competencies into three broad categories, as in Figure 1. They categorized *business-savvy* competencies as “those activities necessary to ensure efficient operations and profitability”; *people-savvy* competencies as those that “revolved around interactions with others and relationship development”; and *self-savvy* competencies as those that are “clustered around self-

management and development” (Testa & Sipe, 2012, p. 652).

Some of these match those in Table 2 directly, but others are worded differently, and are all categorized under the leadership title. However, they are often individually discussed by the authors cited in Table 2, and so comparisons can be made. The competencies from Table 2 can therefore be allocated to the broad groupings used by Testa and Sipe (2012). These categories are used in discussing HFCs:

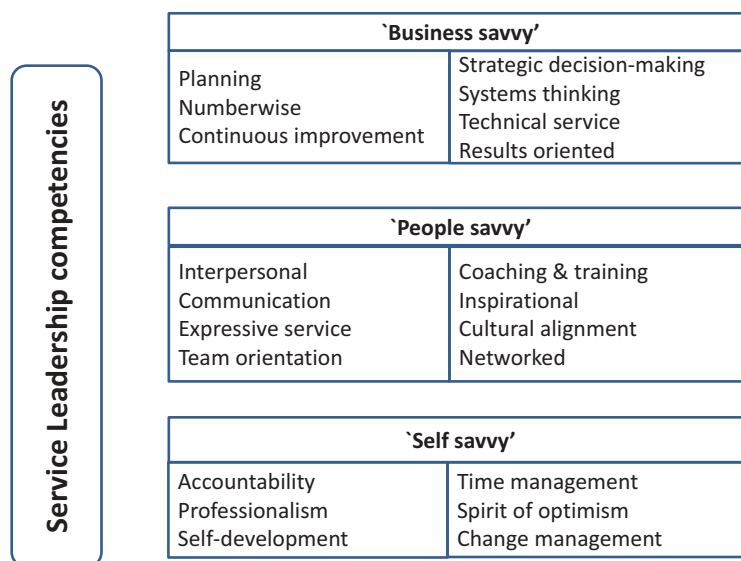
Business-savvy: Analysis, financial awareness, innovation, planning, presentations, problem solving, strategic thinking

People savvy: Communication, cultural awareness, customer focused, leadership, listening, motivation, negotiation, teamwork, training

Self-savvy: Ethics and integrity, flexibility, organization, professionalism, self-development, time management

Competencies of accounting managers

Data from similar research among generic accountants have been included for comparison, although much of the research into management accountants focuses on technical skills, with only a limited emphasis on managerial competencies: for example Albu and colleagues (2011), and Gammie and Joyce (2009) who also analyzed advertisements. No comparable model to that of Testa and Sipe (2012) has

**Figure 1.** Hospitality competency model.

Adapted from Testa & Sipe (2012)

been identified in the management accounting area, despite Drobocky (2013) and Jackling and de Lange (2009) arguing that accounting graduates need a greater range of managerial skills.

Again different terminologies are used: Bots and colleagues (2009) replicated work of Birkett (2002), but both use different titles and definitions on occasion to those found in the generic literature. Teamwork and leadership, for example, are combined in their work, whereas generic sources treat them separately. Their key competencies of accountants were cited as “inquisitiveness, intelligence, research, balance,” none of which were mentioned in the HFC advertisements or hospitality literature. Research by Kim and colleagues (2012), on behalf of CIMA, included a range of competencies within the broad scope of leadership (as found in the Testa & Sipe [2012] model). They combine teamwork and communication, whereas other researchers see them as separate.

A further difference is level. Lawson and colleagues (2006) looked at the stages at which these various competencies are developed, showing that it is the technical skills that are focused on in early careers, rather than those related to management which may be developed later. This contrasts with hospitality where these competencies are identified as being at entry level (Ricci, 2010, for example), and again comparisons will be made with HFCs.

Therefore, there is limited evidence from the accounting area, but extensive evidence from hospitality, as to the competencies that may be required of managers. In hospitality, there is little contextualization to any particular role, other than general managers. The specific scope of HFCs may well require particular competencies, therefore enabling a clearer definition of the role, potentially benefiting other managers and in turn enhancing performance and profitability.

The role and responsibilities of HFCs

Challenges faced by HFCs

Despite the perceived financial implications of the challenges facing the industry, there is no direct current research in this area in the United Kingdom, other than by the author. The 2010 survey (Burgess, 2012b) showed that the expectations of stakeholders

for ongoing profitability put pressure on operating managers to generate revenues and control costs, necessitating a strong understanding of all aspects of their operating areas, supporting evidence from the previous survey (Burgess, 2007). When combined with increased competitiveness resulting in a focus on quality and service, the operation had become leaner. For group hotels, increasing centralization and standardization of systems and processes to cut costs had indicated caution (as identified in previous surveys) about limited control in the units. The 2015 survey showed that these issues are ongoing, with operational managers needing increased information and analysis to generate sales and profits, confirming findings by Pavlatos (2015).

The interviews were conducted just prior to the U.K. referendum (Brexit), and at the time of increased terrorist attacks in Europe, and hence there was much uncertainty as to future business. Externally, the concerns were more short term with the political situation causing worry among travelers, particularly those international hotel groups that relied on U.S.-based visitors (but also some regional U.K. groups: Participants A and B). Half the participants commented on a reduction of business, with Participant F saying that “the whole of our competitor set is struggling.” This in turn puts more pressure on profits, although there were also several comments that owners generally understood the issues. The resultant “jitteriness” (Participant H) in the market also results in short lead times on bookings, particularly in the conference market, making forecasting of staffing and purchasing difficult. More positively, there were few concerns about cash for reinvestment, with Participants D, F, and H all saying there were plenty of funds available for re-investment, an improvement on previous findings, but stakeholders also expected greater accountability (Participant C).

At local level there were immediate concerns (Participants A, F, H, and J) about the effect of the Living Wage directive, with a direct impact on payroll, and indirectly affecting supplier costs, and so the impact on costs and profits was even higher than anticipated. In addition, the quality and diversity of systems was concerning, particularly for the U.K. regional groups who had not experienced the level of investment of the major international brands. Participant H said that their systems “creak a bit” and others that the systems

in place did not provide adequate financial information to enable managers to understand their operational results. In turn, this affects the ability of managers to control revenues and costs, with a consequent effect on performance and profits.

Therefore, many issues affect the role of the HFC, some being relevant to business in general and others specific to the industry. Understanding the context, therefore, is important to the role of the HFC, which will be explored further.

The role of HFCs

The role of financial managers generally has increased with the increasing responsibilities faced by managers (Hartman and Maas, 2011), both as an advisor and as the police, with Kim and colleagues (2012) showing that this is likely to escalate in future years, albeit with continuing emphasis on the technical aspects of the role. There is no definitive job description applicable for all HFCs because of the variety of ownership and management structures, as outlined earlier, although the Hospitality Professionals Association has produced a simple generic job description for an HFC (hospa.org, 2016). This commences with “to support and advise the management team in all areas of finance maximise profitability...ensure financial controls,” and then gives a broad indication of the technical aspects. The role has been defined by Field (2006, p. 454) as follows:

To be responsible for the hotel’s accounting and financial management requirements. Managing the accounting department, procurement function and

electronic data processing systems. To provide the general manager and unit management team with meaningful and timely information on the status of the hotel’s performance. To assist proactively with cost containment, revenue enhancement, profit improvement opportunities and safeguarding of the company’s assets.”

The HFC, therefore, requires both technical and managerial competences to perform their roles (Burgess, 2007, 2011), as in Figure 2, although the technical aspects are not within the scope of this article.

Ownership structures influence the type of accounting undertaken within the unit and therefore the scope of the role. Where the hotel is operated as a single business (even if part of a group), then it is known as *self-accounting* and may produce all their own accounts (Burgess, 2013a). This requires the HFC to have extensive technical skills, as shown in the HoSPA simple job description (hospa.org). However, some companies have centralized their accounts processes (Espino-Rodriguez & Taylor, 2006), and here there are far fewer accounting functions performed within the units, and so the HFC may have lower levels of authority and responsibility. Despite comments about increased centralization of systems the survey indicates that many hotels do produce their own accounts, with only 16% saying they were centralized (and only one of the interviewees). However, some of the more specialist tasks may be centralized (e.g., credit approval, 49% of respondents; insurances: 67% of respondents), and several of the interviewees said that they clustered some roles (Participants F and I, for example).

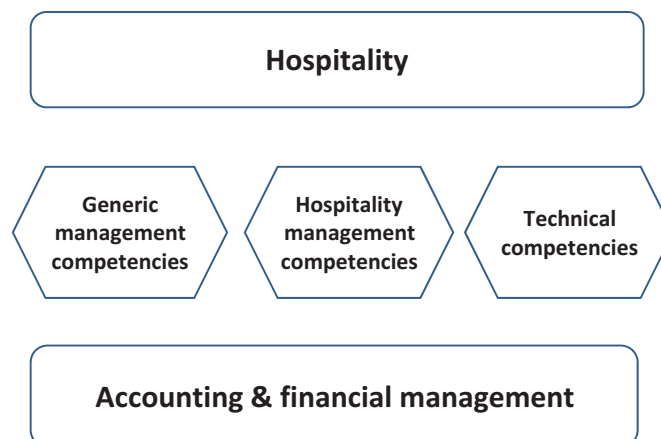


Figure 2. Conceptual model of the role of the hotel financial controller.

All managers are expected to act with ethics and integrity and follow standard operating processes according to company and legal requirements (McFarland, 2014; Simons, 2012). Where the hotel is self-accounting, HFCs have to complete formal accounting statements (Burgess, 2011), including tax returns, and so adhere to a range of regulations. Compliance generally was taking increasing amounts of time according to survey respondents, and this can be exacerbated if they also have to adhere to U.S. Sarbanes-Oxley regulations, according to Participant I. He said that this causes additional “checks and balances” because of the requirement of extensive separation of duties.

These accounting structures also influence the amount of interaction that the HFC has with others. Previous research (Burgess, 2012a) has identified that HFCs interact with a range of stakeholders, at different levels, both internal and external to the company, as in Figure 3. These earlier findings have been supported in the most recent research, with many respondents to the survey identifying a need to liaise with a variety of stakeholders, such as owners, banks, suppliers and customers as well as other managers and staff. All these stakeholders have different needs and expectations (Waligo, 2011), and so different approaches may be required. For example, Participant F said that the HFC needs to “think like an owner,” indicating that the HFC should be

taking a different approach with external rather than internal stakeholders.

In hotels, the major role of managers is to deliver customer service to optimize customer satisfaction and hence profitability (Jauhari, 2006; Jeffrey et al., 2002) for stakeholders. They work as part of a team to manage all aspects of the day-to-day operations, including customer care, quality and standards, managing staff and growing the business (Hancer et al., 2009; Jeffrey et al., 2002; Qiao & Wang, 2009). This includes the HFC who manage their own reporting teams, as identified by Field (2006, p. 454). This supports generic research by Hales (2006) who has shown that all managers direct subordinates, utilizing resources provided by senior management in order to fulfill their roles in operationalizing strategic decisions and generating a return for investors (Heidemann Lassen et al., 2009; Qiao & Wang, 2009).

Survey responses showed that more than half of respondents were managing more than five staff members directly, and some respondents expected this to increase with the growth in activities. Some HFCs also had responsibility for other functions, Participant E saying that his HFCs also had responsibility for human resource activities in their small boutique hotels, mirroring results from the United States (Venegas, 2014b). More than a quarter of survey respondents were responsible for systems management, and a third also had duty

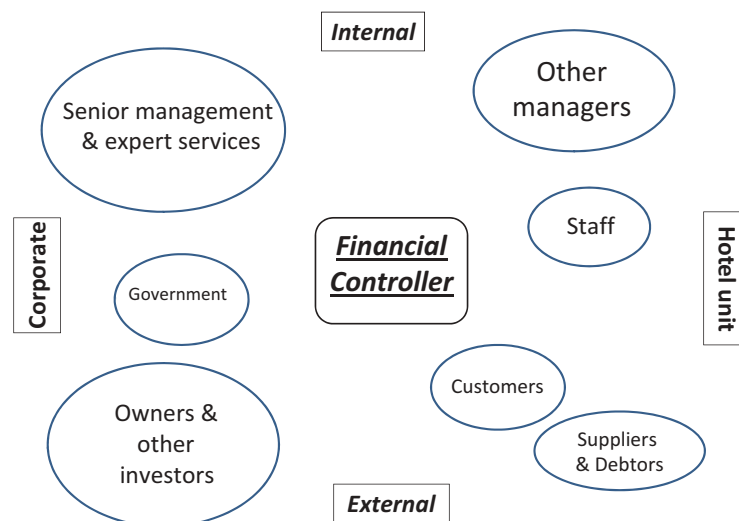


Figure 3. Stakeholders of hotel financial controllers.
Source: Burgess (2012a).

management responsibilities, whereby they had responsibility for other staff outside of their functional area. As a result, the role is “growing” (Participant B), with Participant I saying that the leadership and advisory aspects are becoming more important.

The growing responsibilities of departmental managers for profitability have resulted in an increasing role for the HFC, both as an advisor and as the police (Gibson, 2002; Hartmann & Maas, 2011) to maintain the high ethical standards of compliance to regulations and company standards. The general manager has overall financial responsibility for the success of the business, but the level of finance skills demonstrated by managers is low (Burgess, 2007; Nolan et al., 2010; Tesone & Ricci, 2006). Interviewees commented that they may be more sales-oriented (Participants G and C) and have less understanding of the cost implications, often as a result of being “home-grown” (Participant C) and long-serving (Participant G) and less accountable for profits. Participant G also commented that their culture was “not about cost control,” supporting Participant H who said that “even GMs have a way to go” in understanding cost control.

Burgess (2007), Countryman and colleagues (2005), Pavlatos (2015), and Venegas (2014a) all stressed the importance of the HFC as a member of the management team in aiding managerial decision making (Bangchokdee & Mia, 2016), supporting some of the generic findings by Hartman and Maas (2011) and Kim and colleagues (2012). Survey respondents said that this is likely to grow, with more analysis and interpretation to aid other managers, commenting that “it’s more about interaction with other departments” and “more integrated with the operating units.” From the interviews, broad comments imply that departmental managers in the major international chains tend to have higher levels of financial expertise (Participants B, D, and F), aided by better systems and financial information, whereas those in the regional hotels had extensive operational knowledge but often largely limited to the optimization of sales. Here the limited systems can also inhibit the ability of managers to control costs (Participants C, G, and H), supporting comments from survey respondents. This lack of knowledge all affects the HFC, who may have to monitor costs and advise departmental managers as to where savings can be made.

All interviewees commented on the importance of the finance role, with Participants A, C, and J emphasizing the amount of support the HFC needs to give other managers in understanding the financial implications of their actions, an ongoing feature that has emerged throughout the literature. This includes aiding in the analysis of past data to identify issues, and using this in the planning processes, both short and long term (Jones, 2008). They also need to be able to help other managers identify new ways of doing business, by thinking innovatively and creatively, all to optimize profitability (Burgess, 2013b; Hancer et al., 2009).

Therefore, HFCs have continuing interaction with other departments, with one respondent commenting that “the actual finance role hasn’t changed over the last 20 years, it’s just the systems that have improved.” All these activities, therefore, require a range of managerial as well as technical competencies.

Competencies required of HFCs

The competencies identified in the hospitality, and accounting, areas are now applied to HFCs. The primary research has identified those competencies expected of HFCs, against which there is limited extant literature for comparison. In 2004, Gibson’s research reviewed their overall behavioral roles, but with little attempt to identify the relevant competencies, and Venegas (2014a) in the United States has identified that presentation and communication skills are critical, plus an understanding of the effect of managerial decision making. Further work in the United States among HFCs has identified the financial skills required (Damitio et al., 2016) but have not explored the managerial aspects. The competencies identified in Table 2 are ranked in Table 4 according to the analysis of advertisements, and compared to those from the survey, where the proportion of “very important” or “some importance” from the respondents is shown. It should be noted, however, that not all competencies were addressed in the survey.

To compare the role with generic management accountants, data from similar research by Jackling and de Lange (2009), Bots and colleagues (2009), and Kim and colleagues (2012) is included. These may, however, be incomplete because of the different terminologies mentioned above. Although France (2010) performed a similar analysis of

Table 4. Competencies Required of Hotel Financial Controllers.

	Advertisements for HFCs		Survey of HFCs: "importance"		Jackling and de Lange (2009)	Bots et al. (2009)	Kim et al. (2012)
	Rank	%	Very (%)	Some (%)	Rank	Rank	Rank
Financial awareness/numeracy	1	51.6			4=	1=	5
Teamwork	2	48.4	89.7	10.3	9=		8=
Communication	3	41.9	100.0		1=	9=	8=
Time management/deadlines	4	38.7			7=		
Leadership	5	32.3	82.8	17.2		32	1=
Analysis	6=	29.0			4=		6
Training	6=	29.0					
Motivation self and others	8	25.8					
Planning	9	16.1	82.8	17.2		18	7
Customer focused	10=	12.9	48.3	34.5			
Ethics and integrity	10=	12.9			10=	3=	4
Presentations	10=	12.9	27.6	51.7			
Flexibility	13=	9.7			3=	3	6=
Innovation	13=	9.7	48.3	41.4			13
Organization	13=	9.7	82.8	17.2		38	
Strategic thinking	13=	9.7	79.3	20.7			
Professionalism/work ethic	13=	9.7			6=		11
Problem solving	18	6.5	96.6	3.4	2=		
Self-development	19=	3.2	62.1	37.9			
Listening	19=	3.2					
Cultural awareness		0	51.7	48.3			
Negotiation		0	62.1	34.5			

advertisements, his findings focused on the technical skills (the tasks required) rather than generic competencies.

Overall, the results from the advertisements and survey show far more connections between the hospitality competencies than the limited range found in the accounting literature. Hence the indications are that there is a greater match with hospitality rather than accounting managers. The adapted Testa and Sipe (2012) model can be used to analyze these competencies.

Business-savvy competencies

From an HFC's perspective, the business-savvy aspects relate to the more technical aspects of their role, although some have a managerial focus. Unsurprisingly the highest rated skill in the advertisements and for management accountants was *financial awareness*, although it was still not mentioned in almost half the advertisements, perhaps being too obvious. Given the lack of skills of other managers (Burgess, 2011), this becomes even more relevant.

Those competencies that are linked to the technical aspects (*hard skills*: Sisson & Adams, 2013) listed in the job description (hospa.org) such as analysis were highly ranked by all, this being

essential for the identification of issues to enable future decision-making (Bangchokdee & Mia, 2016). Given the importance of budgeting and forecasting (Jones, 2008; Steed & Gu, 2009), it would be expected that planning would be an important skill, and the evidence from the survey confirms this. However, again this is far less important in the generic area, despite the confirmation of the increased role in supporting managers as evidenced by Kim and colleagues (2012).

In identifying issues and finding solutions in their complex environment, the survey showed that skills such as problem solving are critical, but again have limited evidence in the generic area, suggesting that these might be more important in this specific context, nor are they recognised in the accounting literature, again highlighting the differences in the role. Managers often need to be innovative in identifying opportunities (Burgess, 2013b) and this was also seen as relevant in both advertisements and survey, but only mentioned by Kim and colleagues (2012) for accountants.

People-savvy competencies

HFCs manage their own teams in their departments, and also act as a member of the

management team (Burgess, 2011; Field, 2006; Gibson, 2004). *Teamwork* ranked second highest in the advertisements, after financial skills, and also highly for the survey respondents and for two of the accounting researchers. However, Bots and colleagues (2009) did not mention this directly (combining it with leadership), compared to the importance cited by other accounting researchers such as Paullsson (2012).

The complex role of HFCs means that they communicate with a wide range of stakeholders on a daily basis, as in Figure 2, and this was cited as the most important competence in the survey, with 100% rating as “very important,” supporting the evidence from the advertisements (third ranked). Although Jackling and De Lange (2009) also rated it as their top skill, it was lower ranked by the other two researchers. The related skills of listening or negotiation were not mentioned in any depth in the accounting literature or in the advertisements, despite being important to HFCs themselves. This reinforces the multitasking description of HFCs given by Echenberg (2010) and the interaction with many people that is an integral part of hotels.

Jeou-Shyan and colleagues (2011) indicated that leadership was one of the most important competencies for hospitality managers, and this is supported by both advertisements and survey. The Bots and colleagues (2009) research showed this as very lowly ranked, compared with Kim and colleagues’ (2012) leadership focus. HFCs are expected to take a leadership role both within their own teams and in discussing financial aspects with other managers, according to both survey respondents and interviewees. Participant I said that “a lot of leadership is required” and Participants B and D that the HFC was expected to lead in challenging the financial results. Leadership is linked to motivation, managers needing to motivate both their staff and themselves, so this also a self-savvy competence that was found in a quarter of the advertisements.

In managing their teams and fulfilling the expectations of the role of the department, HFCs also need to train their reporting staff (Burgess, 2011), as extensively argued throughout the hospitality area (Quinn, 2003; Weber et al., 2013). It was mentioned in 29% of the advertisements and was

extensively commented on by the interviewees, with all the major companies providing extensive training to their staff. Participants referred in particular to the importance also of training other managers in financial skills, with many HFCs actively involved with this within their units. However, it was not mentioned as a competence by the accounting researchers, although this may be due to the more formalized accounting education and training system that is used (see CIMA, for example: cimaglobal.com).

There is extensive literature in the area of cultural awareness in hotels with their culturally diverse workforce as well as clientele (Quinn, 2013; Sourouklis & Tsagdis, 2013). Although HFCs main roles are not customer facing, they may well interact with customers as part of their duty management responsibilities, and will certainly meet with many types of staff. This was endorsed by the survey respondents, more than half of whom said that cultural awareness was “very important,” and the rest “fairly important.” There were also several comments from survey respondents about being “increasingly customer-focused” or “must be customer-centric.” The analysis of job advertisements, however does not show any evidence of this, nor do any of the accounting results, despite management accountants having client responsibilities (cimaglobal.com). It may be that this is a competence that is expected of all managers, but given that other key competencies are clearly mentioned this omission seems somewhat surprising.

Self-savvy competencies

The extensive and complex workload of HFCs, evidenced by both the HoSPA job description and the tasks identified in the survey, mean that they must manage their time effectively to meet their deadlines. This competence scores very highly in both advertisements and survey, supported by a need for good organizational skills, although little is explicitly mentioned in the literature. Only Jackling and de Lange (2009), however, mentioned time management and organizational skills were lowly ranked by Bots and colleagues (2009). At the same time, managers need to be flexible (Tavitiyaman et al., 2014), and

able to respond to changing circumstances in the varying business patterns that are found in hotels. They should be able to suggest alternatives, using their innovation and problem-solving skills as above.

The importance of adhering to standards and regulations (compliance) has been shown as an important aspect of the HFCs role, at both unit and corporate level (Burgess, 2011; Simons, 2012). The HFC, therefore, needs to operate with high levels of ethics and integrity to ensure compliance as well as optimum profitability and cash flow. The ability to adhere to these is partly dependent on the HFC remaining up-to-date with industry and managerial practice, and hence self-development also becomes an important part of their role, cited by two-thirds of survey respondents. This relates both to professional development (Burgess, 2011), but also to the learning by experience cited by Li and colleagues (2013) as critical to hotel managers growth. In the accounting area there is extensive discussion of the need to remain current in the technical areas (see cimaglobal.com, for example), but little regarding managerial skills. Therefore, the HFC must adopt a strong work ethic and professional approach, the results supporting earlier findings by Burgess (2011).

The importance of operational experience

The comparison of these competencies has identified that there are some similarities between HFCs and accountants, although they appear to demonstrate far more of the hospitality competencies. However, further discussion of the industry context is necessary.

The hotel industry is “different,” with Espino-Rodriguez and Gil-Padilla (2015) commenting on the complexity of hotel operations, supporting earlier work by Ribeiro-Soriano and Urbano (2010). Evidence from the primary research demonstrates that HFCs need a range of management competencies that are focused towards this specific industry context, as understanding this is critical (Cheng & Wong, 2015; Giousmpasoglou, 2014). Therefore, in addition to the generic competencies, many authors (Quinn, 2013; Walsh et al., 2015, for example) have stressed the importance of a service orientation, and in particular the benefits of operational experience.

The traditional route into the HFC role (Burgess, 2011) has been through industry experience, often in an operational role, and then moving into the finance area, gaining professional qualifications while in the work place, although there are also some direct routes into hospitality finance available to graduates, such as those offered by several major international hotel groups. This enables the combination of experience and specialism.

Supporting other managers in their decision making is a critical part of the HFC role and, as shown above and restated by Venegas (2014a), they must have a strong understanding of all aspects of the operation, including customer behavior, supporting Singal's (2015) arguments of the importance of applied expertise. This was evidenced by two thirds of the advertisements specifying hospitality experience and all survey respondents saying that they had operational experience, many with more than one operational role. When this is combined with data on length of employment in the industry it suggests that many had worked in the operational areas before moving to finance, supporting earlier findings by Gibson (2004) and Burgess (2007, 2011). The interviewees also commented on the importance of the HFC understanding the operation, with Participant B stating that this knowledge will help challenge operational decisions to ensure that the optimum approach is taken. Given the lack of financial expertise discussed earlier, the HFC must be able to understand the complexities of the hotel operation, and the interrelationship of the different areas, with Participant F saying the HFC “must know the business.”

There is some evidence in the accounting area of the importance of work experience, particularly by Jackling and de Lange (2009), but there was very little exploration of the development of customer-service skills, despite the liaison with clients as demonstrated in the job descriptions supplied by CIMA (cimaglobal.com). For HFCs, however, these are seen as critical by all commentators, and has been re-emphasized in the primary research. Therefore, further differences between generic accountants and HFCs are evidenced.

Conclusions

The question that was asked was “Are they hospitality managers or accountants—or something

different?” The evidence suggest that HFCs require a wide range of general management competencies (as applicable to all hospitality managers) as well as the technical skills for their areas of work. Their role continues to be that of supporting other managers, analyzing reports and helping other managers make effective, informed decisions. This requires skills in problem solving, planning, leadership, and teamwork, as in Table 4, all of which appear to have a much higher relevance than those found in the generic accounting roles. This additionally necessitates expertise and knowledge of specific industry characteristics such as perishability, ownership patterns, capital intensity and changing markets in a dynamic and complex environment. The challenges facing the industry, such as difficult market conditions (particularly regionally), increasing technology, payroll costs and lack of investment require managers to plan carefully and make informed decisions. Understanding this industry context, preferably via operational experience, enables HFCs to be key members of the management team and therefore a hospitality background, probably at operational level, is preferred.

The implications for industry are the need to recruit HFCs who have the management competencies plus the necessary operational experience, as well as the technical skills, while enabling them to gain professional qualifications. This will enable them to understand the complexity of hotel operations and then advise departmental and general managers as to the most appropriate actions within the context, for optimum profitability. It is this combination that makes the HFC a valued member of the management team, according to both the current and previous research in this field, raising the profile and status of the industry. For individuals, even those who have graduated in another field, such as accounting, the gaining of practical operational experience will be invaluable for their future career success. As one HFC from the survey said, “It takes a certain type of person to work in hospitality—very dynamic, great people.”

Notes on contributor

Catherine Burgess is a senior lecturer of financial management hospitality and tourism industries in the Oxford School

of Hospitality Management at Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, England.

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